

A Fishy Resurrection

Luke 24:36-43

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You may not have ever thought about it this way, but fish play an important role in the resurrection. Fish feature prominently in both Luke and John's telling of the disciples' encounter with the risen Christ. I honestly hadn't given it a whole lot of thought myself, until one day, after I preached from the Gospel of John, about how Jesus grills fish over an open fire on the beach, that a younger child in the congregation approached me after worship, visibly upset. "I don't want resurrection to happen!" he said, with a disarmingly honest mix of both certainty and fear. As he shared this conviction with me, I noticed his mother had developed significant interest in our ceiling. "I think I hate resurrection," he said. "Okay, George — can you tell me why?" His mother turned her attention to the carpet. "I hate resurrection," he said, "because I hate fish. If I have to eat fish in the resurrection, I'm not doing it."

Suddenly understanding why George's mother absolutely could not bring herself to catch my eye, I told George that while it's true that in John's Gospel, Jesus gives fish to the disciples, in Luke's Gospel, the disciples give fish to Jesus. "Only Jesus eats fish the way Luke tells the story," I told him. George looked at me with bewildered eyes, and I mentally started thinking about how to explain the realities of four different Gospel accounts to a six year old. He stared at me a bit longer and then he exclaimed, "Well, why on earth didn't you read that one?!"

The story from Luke's Gospel that Kathleen read for us comes after two people encounter Jesus on the road to Emmaus. They are walking along, discussing Jesus' death, when they meet someone who is, as best they can tell, a stranger. The stranger joins them on their journey, and when they reach their destination, they invite the stranger to stay with them. The stranger agrees, and they provide him not just a place to sleep, but a shared meal around a table. It was when he sat down at the table with them, when he took some bread, and blessed it, and broke it into pieces to share with them, that their eyes were opened, Luke tells us. Their eyes were opened and they recognized him at the table, where he had sat with them so many times before. Where he had fed them so many times before.

But like I told George, this is where things shift a bit. After the road to Emmaus, Jesus appears to his disciples, terrifying them. Now, sitting here together, it's easy for us to get a little judgmental with the disciples. But I ask you — how do you think you might react?

It was a long time ago now, but there was a beloved man named Harold at one of my previous churches. And when Harold died, it broke all of our hearts. His memorial service was scheduled for about 10 days out, on a Saturday, so at the Sunday prior, we planned to share the arrangements with the congregation. I had a meeting with the family, coming in from out of town, scheduled for Tuesday. I remember these details very specifically, and here's why. I walked into the Sanctuary a few minutes before worship was to begin that Sunday, looked up, and saw Harold sitting on the third pew.

So here's what I do when I encounter someone who I think is dead, but turns out to be walking around. I put serious distance between that person and myself. And I go grab a colleague's arm and drag them into the Sanctuary and hiss at them to look on the third pew. And only when that colleague nearly chokes on their coffee, only after I have been assured that if I am hallucinating I am at least not hallucinating alone, only then will I approach this figure.

You probably figured it out faster than I did. When I talked with Harold's children, they mentioned that Harold had a brother. They did not, however, mention that it was an identical twin brother.

So apparently that's how I would have responded to encountering the risen Jesus. Backing away, whispering, and desperately concerned I might need some sort of emergency health intervention. It is my hope and my prayer that all of you will receive the risen Lord with more composure and grace than me.

But this is precisely why the fish matters so much. Especially in the Gospel of Luke. Scholars readily agree that the Gospel of Luke makes the strongest case for Jesus' resurrection being a bodily resurrection. This is in part because of his conversation with the disciples. "Look, these are my hands and my feet. This is my body. It's me. Touch me and see. A ghost doesn't have flesh and bones as you can see and feel that I have." The statement comes directly from Jesus himself. He is before them in a real and complete body.

And then to drive the point home, he asks them for something to eat. He asks not because he needs a late-night snack. He never mentions anything about hunger. His request is not for his own sustenance. His request is so that his disciples, his friends, might see even more clearly. Because ghosts do not eat. Angels do not eat. This was actually something that had been addressed in Greek culture at the time. Only people, people with real, actual bodies, eat. Jesus eats a piece of broiled fish in order to make it abundantly clear, beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is really him. It is really his body. He is really resurrected.

This may be a point of departure for you, and if that's the case, that's okay. There are many good and faithful Christians who believe resurrection is something to be understood metaphorically, not bodily. And there are many good and faithful Christians who believe resurrection is something to be understood literally, bodily. Though I was not always, I now find myself situated squarely in the second category.

I find myself entirely tied to a bodily resurrection because I believe so strongly in a bodily incarnation. Jesus Christ was God dwelling among us, experiencing all that we experience, enduring all that we endure, feeling all that we feel. Jesus Christ was God dwelling among us and then dying among us, demonstrating that there is no place God will not go, nothing God will not do, in order to be with us in absolutely every way. That theological claim requires a real body. A real body that was born and cried and ate and grew, a real body that laughed and ran and fell and cried, a real body that celebrated and grieved, a real body that ate and drank, a real body that hung on a cross and breathed its last. And the way I understand it, if resurrection is to be as powerful as we proclaim it to be, then resurrection has to be about a real body, too.

Scholars Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington are about as divergent as they can be while both still specializing in the New Testament. Among other differences, Dr. Levine is Jewish, while Dr. Witherington is Christian. Both are devoted academics. In the last few years, they authored a commentary on the Gospel of Luke together, paring their academic prowess with two vastly different traditions. It is a work of tremendous insight as well as a demonstration of respecting one another even while believing differently. But both of them agree: the importance of the broiled fish cannot be overstated when it comes to understanding this resurrection story. Dr. Levine puts it plainly: the story could have been told differently, but it wasn't. And if you are going to take this story seriously, she says, you have to consider what meaning it carries into your life. If we over-spiritualize Jesus' resurrection, it allows us to over-spiritualize our discipleship. If the resurrection isn't real, then we could claim faith without a willingness to sacrifice for others. We could claim a faith without a cross. We could claim a faith without any engagement of real-life issues in this world, all while claiming loyalty to an otherworldly, metaphorical Christ. We could, except the gospels clearly reject that definition of discipleship.

Every gospel account includes details that suggest there is some sort of difference between the Jesus the disciples had known before the crucifixion and the risen Jesus they encounter after the resurrection. And at the very same time, they go out of their way to emphasize that the risen Jesus is the same Jesus. Resurrection brings us a Jesus that is not the same, but is the same. If I understand the text, Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' bodily resurrection, shows him having become his most full self. He was who he had always been, but he was also something more.

None of us are Jesus, but resurrection means we, too, can spend our lives becoming more than we are right now. Here's what I mean:

When I was 10 years old, I loved reading. I loved it so much I really didn't want to do anything else. Birthdays and Christmases were full of books and more books, and probably some socks and other necessities, but I didn't really care about any of that. I just wanted to read.

By the time I was 15, some of that had changed. I still loved to read, but I had also discovered field hockey. I woke early in the morning to run a few miles before school, and I stayed after school for practice. When I thought about college, I wanted a good English program, but I also wanted to play hockey.

When I was 20, I was in college, majoring in creative writing and playing field hockey. But then in my junior year I hurt my ankle, and I missed most of the season. I discovered that there was a whole host of other activities in college if you aren't spending all your time in the athletic department. I was invited to edit the weekly newspaper, and I wandered into a Presbyterian church for the first time, and when my senior year rolled around, I didn't go back to playing hockey, because things had shifted for me.

There are still traces of that 10 year old in me, and that 15 year old, and that 20 year old, though they are a little harder to find these days. And now I am twice as old as I was in college. I still love reading, though I have had to concede that no matter how many books I read, I won't read everything I'd like to before I die. I still run, but a lot slower, and often in pursuit of a misbehaving dog. I spend more time in church each week now than I did in an entire year of my childhood. And I live in Columbia, South Carolina, a far cry from my midwest upbringing.

If at age 10 or 15 or 20 you would have told me who I am now, it would have been impossible for me to imagine. The mystery is that I am both at the same time. I am, and I am not, that 10 year old kid who would not take her nose out of the book. I am that kid, and I am not that kid. I am the same, but I am not the same.

Resurrection is something like that, but infinitely more so. We see Jesus as he was, and we see Jesus as what he has become. And in that way, he shows us not only who we have been, but who we are capable of becoming. He shows us the world as it has been, and shows us the world that is possible.

To live by the resurrection is not just to experience the forgiving grace of God for sinful people; it is to experience the renewing grace of God that empowers us to get up and move from our sinfulness into active, joyful service. To live by the resurrection is not just to expect the presence of God in the depth of suffering; it is to expect the active work of God in our individual lives, in the church, and in the world, making way for a new humanity in which the life, justice, and peace of the kingdom of God does finally triumph over the powers of evil, suffering, injustice, and death.

All of that from a single piece of broiled fish. A single piece of broiled fish that you yourself don't even have to eat.